

Concurso de Ensayos 2004

“Inglés: Un Puente Entre Culturas - ¿Cómo Ayudo a Construirlo?” English: A Bridge Between Cultures - How Can I Help Build It?

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It is a cold winter night. August is not in my favorite season but something in the air tells me I am going to have a great time. Hannah is back, six months ago she left to her home town in Chicago where she prepared the final details for her photography exhibition in Santiago.

The art gallery has been perfectly arranged with her collection that is showing only women who are facing their efforts and loneliness in South America. It could be a familiar topic for us but in Hannah's heart it was something really important to relieve due to her women's commitment in life. Suddenly a woman stopped in front of me and asked me about the photographer. I had not seen her yet, so I thought we were waiting for the same person. She introduced herself as Sandra. We smiled at each other thinking of something we had in common, a friend. Then I knew she was Hannah's classmate in Santiago. It was the time for my introduction, but I only said I was a teacher. She thought I was a photographer but when she realized I taught English, her eyes started to bright as if I were a weird but special human being. From that moment I saw an approving attitude about my teaching area like all the people use to have when they know you teach English, and she pronounced the magical words: "So... you can help me". Gosh, here we go again, I said to myself, and in just a few seconds all the typical questionnaire came to my mind each time I had said I am a teacher of English..."What's the best way to learn English?", "Could you recommend us a place where to study?", "I know how to write it but I don't speak very well", or some other people say more enthusiastically: "Can you give me a hand with a short translation"... and later you have at home a whole set of photocopies screaming day after day "translate me or you'll lose a friend"... Or even worse, once I was told "Why don't you speak in English, I understand nothing, but I love the way it sounds in others". All these ideas were flowing in my mind when she said in a low but rude voice "I need a new school for my daughter, they're teaching English... and I think it's not fair, she's only five...". I could not believe it!! It was the first time somebody asked me for a way to escape from English. I breathed slowly in order not to hurt this criminal mother telling her: "are you crazy?", but it was not necessary because I gave her a simple smile, while I tried to understand her point of view.

I never thought I was going to be asked something like that but I needed the right words in my speech to convince this distressed woman.

"Well Sandra, nowadays, I think it is essential for our students that are just beginning school to dominate a foreign language, in this case English, because it is the most useful language in the world. It is used in business, tourism, films, the internet and nearly a 100% scientific publications. Besides, taking into account that more than a billion people is learning English at the moment, sooner, it will be spoken for a bigger number of people as a second language than those who speak

English as a first language. As a tendency our world is becoming bilingual and our challenge as teachers or parents is to bring and open opportunities to our children and mainly our society. Developing countries have made a huge effort investing big amounts of resources to teach English as a second language. Underdeveloped countries should promote and invest the same resources in order to stimulate and support their own progress.

Sandra looked at me doubtfully but I knew it was the opportunity to change her mind.

“ On the other hand your daughter will face this subject everywhere... And it is not a secret since schools are giving the teaching of the English language as soon as it is possible. Teenagers are involved with the language through their schools, music, internet, TV cable programs, video games, comics and so on. At the same time, Universities are offering intensive programs in all their courses of studies and mainly in the business areas it is certainly a must. English has become the clue to open your opportunities and improve your possibilities to have a better horizon”.

While I was speaking, Hannah, her mother and little sister were arriving from the States to the exhibition. They looked proud of themselves bringing a smile for everyone. Sandra interrupted this beautiful scene turning back the conversation. “But, what about an English course when she is a teenager because I’d like to help her but I know a little and it’s not perfect”.

“ Wait Sandra, It’s not a matter of how perfect a language can be, it’s a matter of communication. In fact the English language is able to enhance people making them more open, richer in knowledge and wiser in their social relationships. In the meantime, all these aspects of a language will favor directly on people’s attitudes, giving them tolerance, self-reliance and self-esteem.

Moreover it is essential to work on new technologies to acquire a foreign language in order to increase our economy through exportations, new economical alliances but most important of all to interchange experiences between cultures and scientific progress among nations. It sounds sometimes utopian, but our authorities are working on elevating the efforts to teach English at different levels of our society. Universities and Technical Institutions are demanding international standards in the way they teach and the students perceive the English language. Apart from that, we must consider that businessmen and the Armed Forces are focusing on assessing their staff lately, because they realized the importance of being bilingual in a global world. In addition we can not forget the role of tourism, business and media in this cultural change because they influence tendencies, attitudes and preferences in our community so all these aspects model the idiosyncrasy of a nation”.

Sandra was confused and distrustful with such a fantastic description of the future, so I tried to be down on earth...

“However, it will take time to transform these projects into real effects because our citizens are not aware enough about learning other languages. They have not recognized English as a tool to know more and more information, with the only purpose of getting new opportunities and obtain a better education. This is our task as parents and educators to make people aware about their necessities and prioritize what is really important for our children in a near future”.

The exhibition was ending. It was the time for Hannah to say thanks to all the people that had collaborated in developing this collection of photographs so she started to deliver a short closing speech. Meanwhile, I was reflecting on Sandra and her thoughts about perfection in language. I thought that nobody is perfect in his/her profession, perhaps you can be close to accuracy but not perfection. Suddenly Hannah's mother could not resist the wish to say a few words for being well received in this country. So she said in a deep emotion: "I'd like to thank..." Sandra moved her head slowly at me because the speech was in English now. In a fast movement she ignored me and started to look for her daughter between the guests but her little girl was playing happily with Hannah's little sister.

I went out the art gallery facing this cold august night thinking about an idea to draft a comprehensible message in my faulty English.
